

DONKEY

Scene

The play takes place just outside the Pearly Gates of Heaven. The set may be made as elaborate as desired, but there should be a sign over a stage exit, or possibly a structure, representing the Pearly Gates. There should also be a fairly large apparatus that is used as a weigh-scale. It could be an actual old-fashioned scale with weighing pans on either side, or a simple balance contraption made from lumber and hardware. Fastened in the centre of the scale (instead of the blindfolded goddess of justice) would be a large picture of a donkey, preferably with a blindfold or blinkers. There are also six cubes, each one showing a letter, which when taken together spell D-O-N-K-E-Y. These blocks have other letters on their other five faces. It might be convenient to also have a counter, or a fairly high table with a curtain to conceal the base. This counter could come in handy, particularly at the very end of the play, when certain props have to be revealed quickly.

Cast of Characters

Angel – A personage of a certain age, in heavily upholstered robes, splendid wings, and possibly a headdress which gives the impression of a nimbus. The angel wears sensible shoes.

Person – Someone who looks older than younger, with non-descript features and clothes

The person and the angel may be played by either a man or a woman. For simplicity, they will both be referred to in the text using the grammatically-conventional masculine gender. The dialogue itself is gender neutral.

Suggested pre-play music - “Devil or Angel” by Bobby Vee.

As the lights come up, the angel is arranging the blocks on the scale. On one side he uses the blocks to make the word “OK”. On the other side he makes the word “DENY”. The person enters from somewhere off-stage, looking around in a confused and bewildered way. The angel looks up, stops what he is doing, and shakes his head in an exasperated manner.

Angel: Come along. We don't have all eternity.

Person: Am... Am I dead?

Angel: You most certainly are. You wouldn't be here if you weren't.

Person: Where am I then?

Angel: At the Pearly Gates. Where else would you expect?

Person: And you're an angel...

Angel: Aha! You're catching on. As the Lord's concierge, I'm here to offer you the opportunity to enter Heaven, provided you prove yourself worthy.

Person: I hope I'm worthy.

Angel: I'll be the judge of that.

Person: Yes. As you say...

Angel: Now, please listen carefully. There are some facts I must explain regarding this hallowed instrument, which is known as the Scales of Ultimate Justice. Before being inducted into Heaven, everyone is subjected to a series of questions, to assess their moral fibre and strength of character.

If a reply to a query is considered acceptable, we continue to the next phase of the interview. But if an answer is weighed in the balance and found wanting, a letter will be selected and moved from the heavier to the lighter side of these sacred scales. Starting with a “D”, and then an “O”, then an “N” and so on, for each inadequate response. Do you follow? (*The Angel arranges the letters “D-O-N” sequentially on the appropriate side of the scales to illustrate his speech. The person nods.*) If anyone should have the misfortune to reply inappropriately to a total of six questions, and the word “DONKEY” is spelled in full... (*The angel moves the rest of the cubes over to spell the full word “D-O-N-K-E-Y”. When he adds the final “Y”, the scales shift downwards.*) ...the Scales of Ultimate Justice would tip against him, and he would be deemed too base a creature to receive God’s blessing. At that point the person would be denied access to the Holy Kingdom. Have I made myself clear?

Person: I think so. Six questions. D-O-N-K-E-Y... (*He counts on his fingers. The Angel returns all the letter cubes to the other side of the scale.*)

Angel: Very well. Let us begin. I should also advise you to tell the truth. Lies are not tolerated in Heaven.

Person: Of course...

Angel: I’ll start with the first of the ten commandments. When you walked the earth, did you believe in God?

Person: If I could take a minute, I’d like to mention that I’m quite astonished to be here right now, and to be given this chance at immortality. Don’t get me wrong. I’m also absolutely delighted. Though let’s face it - you can never be totally sure about God and Heaven when you’re alive. But you don’t want to abandon your hope for an afterlife either, even if it sounds too good to be true. So although I didn’t know exactly what I was supposed to believe in, I never stopped going to church. Mostly at Christmas and Easter...

Angel: So you used the high holidays to hedge your bets?

Person: Well, you could put it that way. But I didn’t consider it wise – or even necessary - to wager my soul against God’s existence.

Angel: Hmmph. Hardly an iron-clad testament of undying faith. But it’s a better answer than most come up with. The pious ones are the worst. Those holier-than-thou blowhards. They holler their hollow hallelujahs – congratulating themselves for having had all the true answers about their Heavenly Father all along - when they’d simply made a lucky guess. Sanctimonious pilgrims. I always send them to the narrow-minded rapture they think they want immediately, just to serve them right.

Person: Does that mean I don’t get a “D”?

Angel: Not yet. But we’ll see how you fare with the other key commandments. Did you ever lie, cheat, steal or murder?

Person: I never hurt anyone intentionally, that’s for certain. Once or twice I fiddled my income tax in my favour. And sometimes crossing the border, I neglected to declare a few items to the customs officer. But doesn’t everybody do that?

Angel: Whatever you declined to render unto Caesar stays between you and Caesar. Although if that's all you did wrong, it almost exposes a lack of initiative. But I suppose you can't be faulted for taking your Biblical orders to heart, and following them to the letter.

Person: Thanks.

Angel: Don't express your gratitude prematurely. The questioning is far from over. Next I need to determine how you interacted with your fellow human beings.

Person: *(Smiling.)* My primary school report cards always said I played well with others...

Angel: *(Gives a stern look.)*

Person: Sorry.

Angel: Were you ever married?

Person: No.

Angel: Did you produce any off-spring?

Person: I'm afraid not.

Angel: A pity you didn't exhibit more diligence in the matter of children. There can be special considerations for those who go forth and multiply to perpetuate the human race. But were you at least in love at some point?

Person: There was never anything that was mutual and lasting. Anyone I was interested in always seemed to find someone they preferred instead. And I didn't feel it made sense to hold them back from their true desires. So I always let them go. As a result, I knew love more from its loss than for its joy.

Angel: *(Raising his hand to pick up a cube as if to administer a death-stroke.)* You're not gay?

Person: No. Although I wish I'd experimented more. If only I'd had suitable roll models to lead me along.

Angel: Enough said about that. *(Lowering his hand.)* Are you possibly a virgin? God has a soft spot for virgins.

Person: Not quite. There was the odd night here and there with others in similar circumstances to mine.

Angel: So you used loneliness as an excuse for promiscuity? It seems you occupied all your mortal days indulging only yourself.

Person: I just never found my soul mate, which I suppose allowed me a wider range of freedom.

Angel: You're a sly one, twisting my words around to cast yourself in a better light. But I'll have you know I can see through your ruse, and while I'm somewhat impressed, I'm much more disappointed. However you shrug it off, I'm convinced you're aware that your romantic disasters and cavalier approach to sex are not affairs to be taken lightly. And despite my best efforts to guide you through the intricacies of personal relationships, you've stayed consistently contrary. In short, you've

displayed a perverse lack of commitment to both intimacy and procreation. Surely from all you've disclosed, you can't expect me to think otherwise. So I'm left with no alternative but to reward your self-centred and libertine conduct with the letter "D". (*He crosses the "D" cube over on the scales.*)

Person: Geez. Based on your criteria, there seems to be no safe middle ground between virginity and wedded parenthood. Is it such a deadly sin to have remained happily single?

Angel: No one's perfect. That's why there are six letters in the word Donkey.

Person: Can you tell me something? What is God like?

Angel: Why do you want to know that?

Person: I'm just curious. You hear His name thrown around your whole life. But no one on earth has any idea who he really is. Is He married to a Goddess – or still a virgin?

Angel: God is Whoever He wishes to be. And he doesn't suffer impudence. As far as you're concerned, He's a force of infinite power and pure love. And as we've just established that love is a concept you have great difficulty with...

Person: (*Cutting the angel off.*) I look forward to meeting him.

Angel: We haven't determined you're going to Heaven yet. So it's time to continue with the Lord's work, and for you to tell me about your occupation. What kind of job did you do?

Person: I was employed in a government hospital.

Angel: Were you a doctor or nurse? Did you save lives?

Person: Actually, I was in the purchasing department – for over twenty years.

Angel: Were you somehow able to make a difference? Perhaps you kept track of their most critical drugs...

Person: It was all pretty routine. I bought the cleaning supplies – mops, soap and bleach. There weren't many chances for heroic exploits buying that stuff. It may not have been a high profile position, but it paid the rent.

Angel: Why did you leave? Better opportunities? An offer you couldn't refuse?

Person: Something like that. There was a round of government cut-backs, and under those circumstances hospitals always get rid of the staff who spend their money. So they presented me with an early retirement package and pensioned me off. When I left, my colleagues held a small reception in my honour, and even gave me a standing ovation. It was pretty nice of them.

Angel: Are you sure it was a standing ovation? Or did they simply rise to their feet to gawk and gossip while you finally vacated your institutional broom closet?

Person: I believe their actions were genuine.

Angel: (*Sighing.*) A very unremarkable career all round, I must say. With apparently no moments of distinction whatsoever. And what's more lamentable - throughout your working years you were paid from the public purse. And on your retirement you continued on the community dole, drawing a

pension from the state. Which means you were mooching off society all your life. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. Therefore, for your parasitic behaviour, you earn your just deserts - the letter "O". (*The angel moves the "O" over beside the "D".*)

Person: That's awfully harsh. Does every lifelong civil servant automatically fail your test?

Angel: Not every pencil pusher lies wallowing in soap suds for over twenty years. Those bureaucrats who burst their bubbles and cut through the red tape to make conspicuous contributions are given due credit.

Person: OK. Let's suppose that somehow I manage not to get tripped up by your questions, and I actually pass through the Pearly Gates. What happens then?

Angel: Once you're fitted with your wings, you'd join the Celestial Chorus for several centuries of choir practice. I don't suppose you can sing?

Person: No.

Angel: Then choir practice could go on indefinitely.

Person: What if I wanted to fly away from the God...lovin' glee club and do something else? Maybe a job like yours where I might have more to offer?

Angel: I should warn you not to stray from the Heavenly Host. In Paradise it isn't acceptable to seek special status and stand out above the rest.

Person: I just wouldn't want to be perceived as a holy burden, "mooching" off the Lord's good graces...

Angel: Enough idle talk. Here's your chance to redeem yourself and demonstrate how you acted to benefit humankind. In your spare time, did you ever serve a cause greater than yourself?

Person: (*Pauses*) I'm thinking. I don't want to say anything you might make me regret.

Angel: Were you a member of a volunteer organization? Did you give back to the community?

Person: I played the saxophone in an amateur band. We used to perform concerts at nursing homes and legion halls at Christmas time. The old folks there enjoyed it.

Angel: Why did you join the band?

Person: Because I liked playing the saxophone.

Angel: Not because you wanted to cheer up geriatrics?

Person: That too. It's always nice to have an audience. It was a win-win for everyone.

Angel: But your primary motivation was to please yourself by creating music, not to entertain others.

Person: Well...

Angel: I'm sorry, but that reveals a certain hypocrisy on your part, not a charitable spirit. And it doesn't qualify for community service in my book. (*He moves the "N" cube over.*)

Person: Yeow! You're getting pretty quick on the draw with those blocks of yours.

Angel: I'm just calling the shots as I see fit.

Person: Yeah. With no room for mercy.

Angel: Don't jump to conclusions. All things come to pass according to God's plan.

Person: That sounds menacing.

Angel: If you weren't so cynical, you'd know I'm on your side.

Person: Sweet. If we're such swell pals, would you let me play the saxophone in Heaven?

Angel: There are no saxophones in Heaven.

Person: So I'll have to sing endless hymns of praise instead.

Angel: Indeed.

Person: And that's a nobler calling than making the music I prefer?

Angel: You'll find out if you get there. An intelligent person like yourself must realize that Heaven is ruled by ecclesiastical edicts, not by eccentric whims. It would be chaos otherwise.

Person: Is God really that rigid?

Angel: The Good Lord has far more urgent cosmic concerns than the day-to-day dealings of Heaven. He leaves details like those to his guardian angels.

Person: You mean the likes of you.

Angel: Precisely.

Person: So you invented this Donkey Trial.

Angel: The Welcome Quiz was devised by the Divine Order of the Inquisition.

Person: And you're a member?

Angel: I'm the Grand Inquisitor.

Person: Holy cow!

Angel: This isn't a game, you know. No one can escape the verdict of the Scales of Ultimate Justice. So you'd better buckle down and get serious and show some respect. You're already half way toward spelling Donkey, and three more flippant answers could cause you to miss your chance at Paradise. Whether you appreciate it or not, I've been trying to help you every way I can. So let's get on with it. I want to investigate your creative side. You seem like an imaginative type. Perhaps you can describe your artistic passions and talents.

Person: All right. I'll level with you. It's fair to say that my job, while a significant aspect of my life, was only a means to a paycheck and not an end in itself. Though I never had any pretensions about defining myself in terms of my career. And as for the saxophone, which I adored, if I'd been forced to rely on my musical abilities to put bread on the table, I would have died of starvation. But far more important than either of those pursuits, my special love from first to last was language and writing.

Angel: So you were an author? Or a poet? What was your forte?

Person: Stories and plays mostly. For the past few years, I'd been plugging away at a novel.

Angel: Excellent! How many pieces did you publish?

Person: None. Everything I ever wrote was rejected. But it never dampened my devotion to the creative muse.

Angel: So no one ever read your work?

Person: My friends and family gave me rave reviews.

Angel: That's preaching to the choir.

Person: There you go again, picking on everything I do.

Angel: But there's no point in writing anything if it isn't going to circulate into the world and find a broader audience. If that fails to happen, your lamp of inspiration, no matter how bright, merely remains hidden under a bushel.

Person: I didn't believe in "publish or die". I was content spinning yarns for my own satisfaction. If an editor had actually called back, or if one of my plays had been produced, that would have been icing on the cake. But the process of crafting a dramatic plot or composing a lyrical line, even if I was to be the only reader, was pleasure enough for me.

Angel: It sounds like you're refusing to face reality here. Your literary skills must have been sadly deficient, which is why nothing you wrote was ever accepted for publication. In fact, I suspect that as an author you weren't even talented enough to be an amateur. It's ironic that in the sphere where your greatest passions purportedly lay, you fell so far short of the mark. If it wasn't so tragic it would be a joke. But once again I'm bound to assign you another letter. This time it's a "K". (*The angel moves the "K" over.*)

Person: So I'm a DONK.

Angel: You have only yourself to blame.

Person: Why? Because I'm too ordinary and uncomplicated?

Angel: No. Because with so many interests, you failed to excel at any of them. You buried your talents, instead of investing in them.

Person: You just said I wasn't talented enough to be an amateur. So your sudden switch to shaming criticism and back-handed compliments is totally bogus.

Angel: Perhaps if you'd had suitable role models to lead you...

Person: Hey! That was my line.

Angel: Yes... I thought you'd appreciate it.

Person: You know. I don't think you have any intention of granting me permanent residency in Heaven. But even if I got there, from the way you've described it, I doubt I'd like it anyway.

Angel: People who wouldn't be comfortable in Heaven aren't allowed in. That's why we have this dialogue beforehand. To separate the wheat from the chaff.

Person: Or the donkeys from the horses – and their asses.

Angel: Watch your language. You're coming perilously close to breaking multiple commandments.

Person: Let's just get on with this third degree and finish it off. What's the next category?

Angel: Your legacy on earth.

Person: Fire away. Unless you want to give me an "E" right now.

Angel: Did you leave behind an enduring reputation that could provide a positive influence after your death?

Person: No. *(All his negative answers come before the angel's questions are finished.)*

Angel: Were you successful in motivating others?

Person: No.

Angel: Did you ever assume a position of leadership?

Person: No.

Angel: Were you decorated for bravery beyond the call of duty?

Person: No.

Angel: *(Moving the "E" over on the scale.)* There. Are you satisfied?

Person: I think it was Socrates who said that the unexamined life wasn't worth living. But thanks to this post mortem game show and your autopsy of my existence, my life's less valuable now than before it was analyzed. Which would be a rather disturbing revelation if I respected your opinion. But I was always quite happy being me. And I'm not going to apologize or repent for anything, whatever you claim. So lay on the terrible truth. Where do I go once you've turned me into a donkey and I've been banished from Paradise? Straight to Hell?

Angel: I told you that God was pure love. He'd never permit a place such as Hell to exist.

Person: He may come across as a cute and cuddly superhero. But only because He has a bully like you to boss people around.

Angel: God works in mysterious ways.

Person: So if there's no Hell, then what?

Angel: Disqualified candidates for the afterlife are annihilated into nothingness.

Person: Perfect. That sounds totally peaceful. I can hardly wait. Shoot me the next question.

Angel: This is actually the last topic left for discussion. And it's biased in your favour. If you can recall any kindness you did that would prove you worthy of Heaven in God's eyes, you'll be welcomed there with open arms.

Person: That's it? One boy-scout act? *(Pauses, supposedly to think.)* Nope. Nothing comes to mind.

Angel: Don't be silly. You must have visited a sick relative. Or helped a friend with chores. Or just given some thoughtful advice to someone.

Person: Can't say I ever did.

Angel: Is that your final answer? You know the consequences.

Person: Yup. Thunk. Hee-haw. Ka-Boom.

Angel: I can't accept that response. It's a lie. You can have more time to reconsider. Remember, your eternal destiny is at stake.

Person: I don't need more time. I'm through with all this manipulation bullshit. Give me my letter "Y" and blow me up now!

Angel: Listen here, you ungrateful brat. You spent your whole life shunning challenges and avoiding responsibility. Your greatest sins were always those of omission. And now you're dead you still want to take the easy way out. Well – I'm not going to let you off the hook. It's time to step up to your obligations and choose the proper path. So tell me one good deed... Hurry up. You're going to Heaven whether you like it or not!

Person: You want to send me to a place I'd hate so much it would seem like Hell. That's not serving a compassionate God. That's working for the Devil! You devious demon! If you won't tilt your god damn teeter-totter to blast me to Kingdom Come, I will! *(He reaches toward the "Y" cube.)*

Angel: No!

The person and the angel wrestle around, fighting over the last "Y" cube. Eventually, the person takes the block from the angel and knocks him over the head with it, so he falls down. Then he puts the cube on the scale, spelling the word DONKEY. At that point, the scale shifts down and the image of the Donkey is illuminated. Lights flash on and off and thunder and crashing noises are heard. Then the lights suddenly go out and there is silence.

A few seconds later, the lights slowly come up. The angel is gone. A pair of angel wings lie in his place. The person is lying motionless on the floor. Softly, from the direction of the Pearly Gates, the sound of a saxophone playing "Harlem Nocturne" is heard. As the music increases in strength, the person gradually rises and peers around. He sees the angel wings and lifts them up, revealing a shiny saxophone underneath. The person puts on the wings. Then he picks up the saxophone and goes over to the scales. There he turns the face of each block around, using them to spell the word

"Thanks". Then he puts the mouthpiece of the saxophone to his lips to play. Slowly he goes through the Pearly Gates, as the music hits peak volume.

Fade to black.